Briefing Paper 292	**June 2012**

Opposition Parties
Sustaining Multiparty Democracy?

1. Introduction

South Africa's electoral system is designed to sustain a multiparty democracy.[1] The proportional representation (PR) system facilitates the proliferation of political parties and, in turn, encourages electoral competition. The number of registered parties has increased from around 157 in September 2008[2] to just over 190 in early 2011. Some 42 parties contested the 2009 elections compared to the 26 parties in 1999 and 27 parties in 1994; this number grew to 37 in 2004. In addition, there has been a significant increase in parties contesting at the local level. Last year, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) announced that 121 parties contested the 2011 municipal elections, compared to 97 parties in 2006 and 79 in 2000. This growth in the number of parties is, some would argue, good for the sustainability of multiparty democracy; it certainly indicates that people are free to form parties, to register them and to campaign for votes.

On the other hand, South Africa's multiparty democracy may be considered as weak, in the sense that, since 1994, it has been characterised by one-party dominance and weak opposition parties. Our multiparty system has thus evolved into a 'dominant party system' in which opposition parties are fragmented and unable to challenge for power. This situation is unlikely to change soon, as many political analysts argue that none of the opposition parties appears to have any chance of replacing the African National Congress (ANC) as government in forthcoming elections.[3] Rhodes University's Roger Southall has gone as far as to say that the opposition as a whole faces an existential crisis.[4] As a result, concerns have been raised about whether opposition parties will survive, and equally, about the quality of multiparty democracy in South Africa.

2. Background

A multiparty system is characterised by competition between more than two political parties. Democratic theorists explain that under this system many parties exist with equal chances of becoming governing parties, either individually or through coalitions.[5] Thus, in an ideal multiparty democracy, prospects for a one-party state or a dominant party emerging are relatively small. A classic example is Germany: two major parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), have ruled the country for over 60 years through political coalitions which have also involved smaller parties. Closer to home, Mauritius has long been familiar for its multiparty system where the alternation of holders of state power has been a regular occurrence. Indeed, one of the most encouraging signs of the consolidation of democracy in Africa is the increasing incidence of change in the governing party, as in countries such as Lesotho, Zambia and Ivory Coast.

Then again, in multiparty systems there are numerous cases where one political party dominates and stays in power for decades. For instance, despite the range of parties in Botswana, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has ruled the country since 1966. Namibia's democracy is also characterised by one-party

domination; the South West African People's Party (Swapo) has enjoyed uninterrupted control of political power since the country's first election. Likewise, over the eighteen years of South Africa's democracy, the ANC's electoral dominance increased from 62.6% in 1994 and 66.35% in 1999 to 69.7% in 2004, before dropping slightly to 65.9% in the 2009 elections.

Many scholars argue that one-party domination is problematic for multipartyism; a multiparty system ought to give rise to the emergence of strong opposition parties and a democratic order that provides for the alternation of power between political parties. However, in South Africa a truly competitive multiparty system has not been realised. Against this background, debates about the quality of South Africa's multiparty system are strongly related to the belief that the system is being compromised by one-party domination and the weakness of opposition parties.

3.   The Importance of Opposition Parties

Opposition parties are necessary for building and strengthening democracy. Various definitions of opposition parties note that their primary purpose is to protect the rights and interests of citizens, to monitor government performance, and to expose corruption. In addition, opposition parties bring opportunities for representation and participation. Thus, they can become an alternative political home for those who do not support the ruling party. Furthermore, opposition parties have the responsibility to stimulate debates within society over political issues and policies, thus allowing society to question the actions and choices of government. In this sense, opposition parties are crucial for government accountability as they play an important 'watchdog' role and act as a restraint or check on the abuse of government power.

From the aforementioned, it is clear that opposition parties are important for the development of democracy; in fact, without the formal existence of opposition parties, true democracy would not exist. Unfortunately, in South Africa many opposition parties have been weakened by their poor electoral performance, leading commentators to question their viability; they have become 'toothless' institutions which are not seen as offering a potential alternative in government.

4. Weak Opposition

Up to now, the majority of opposition parties have fared fairly poorly in elections. Susan Booysen, senior politics lecturer at Wits University, expressed the opinion that the 2009 elections were the 'mirror image' of non-performing opposition parties.[6] The 2011 municipal election was no exception. In this election, none of the opposition parties (with the exception of the Democratic Alliance) were able to win more than 4% of the municipal vote. The 'bigger' smaller parties, such as the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the United Democratic Movement (UDM), the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and the Congress of the People (COPE) all saw a sharp decline in their electoral support. The smallest parties, such as the Pan-African Congress (PAC), the United Christian Democratic Party (UCDP) and the Minority Front (MF) each received less than 1% in 2011. Many of these parties have contested since 1994 and broadly cover the ideological spectrum of South Africa. However, despite their political history, they have not been able to win the hearts and minds of voters.

Although the ANC achieved a comfortable victory in 2011, winning 63.65% of the votes and 5 633 council seats nationally, the governing party's support declined in seven of the eight metropolitan municipalities.[7] For instance, in both the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape, the ANC's majority was reduced by an increase in the DA support. In the Western Cape, the ANC's share of the vote fell by 5% compared to the 2006 local elections. Werner Bohler, in his paper titled *On the Road to a Two Party system*, indicated that losing 2.5% in the Gauteng Province was painful for the ANC, especially as this is the province with the largest population (around 11 million) and the strongest economy.[8] Additionally, in KwaZula Natal, the vote is split significantly between the ANC, IFP and the newly-formed National Freedom Party (NFP).

The electoral progress of the DA is worthy of mention. Even though there is still a huge gap between the ANC and DA in terms of national results, the DA has been the only opposition party able to register more than negligible growth. In last year's municipal election, the party attained 24.8% compared to 16.32% in 2006. (It is important to remember, though, that the DA absorbed the Independent Democrats (ID)

before the 2011 election, and that the latter party did not contest the poll.[9]) The party won control of eighteen municipalities against the five it controlled in 2006, but it was not able to achieve one of its main election goals, winning a second metro after Cape Town.

The formation of COPE – a party consisting of disgruntled former members of the ANC –was seen as a very significant development for opposition politics; COPE was expected to perform strongly and to make substantial inroads into the ANC's support base. In the run-up to 2009 elections it was even suggested that COPE would erode the ANC's dominance to the point where South Africa would finally move from a dominant-party system to a competitive multiparty democracy. In the 2009 general election, COPE obtained a modest 30 seats in the National Assembly, representing 7% of the vote. However, the party proceeded to lose much of its support, and could manage only 2.14% in the 2011 municipal poll.[10]

Weak opposition parties raise serious challenges for the future of multiparty democracy. Not only does it strengthen the dominance of the ruling party, but it poses a serious threat to the survival of the very idea of a political opposition and of electoral choice. The need for a stronger opposition has thus taken centre stage in the political discourse. However, the political environment has made it extremely difficult for opposition parties to operate in a meaningful way. A number of reasons have been advanced to explain opposition parties' failure to attract more support. These include a lack of strategy, ideological weaknesses, insufficient funding and campaign resources, and poor party image and leadership, to name a few.

4.1. Funding

Jo-Ann Downs of the ACDP has written that *"elections are all about money: the more posters you have, the more people you employ to send the message, the more money you can pay for advertising, the more the electorate notices you"*.[11] A political party's performance is thus, to some extent at least, dependent on its financial resources. Parties receive public funding in terms of the Public Funding of Represented Political Parties Act 103 of 1997. The Act provides financial support to parties represented in national and provincial legislatures, but it does not cover newly established political parties which have yet to win seats; neither would it cover a party which has lost all the seats it

previously held. In addition, the funds received from the state cannot cover the total expenses of political parties.

Parties receive public funding in a strictly proportional manner, with the result that the ANC could receive up to R60 million and the DA R15 million, while smaller opposition parties stand to get only R2 million or less.[12] Many analysts argue that the formula used for the disbursement of money has thus added to the ANC's long incumbency. At the same time, it does little to help smaller parties to compete. For instance, in 2011 the Mail and Guardian reported that the ACDP had been 'battling with resources' and was not financially able to produce enough posters for that year's municipal election.[13] And Dr Brigalia Bam, former chairperson of the IEC, has noted that the lack of party funding limits the capacity of smaller opposition parties to mobilise membership.[14]

It is difficult, however, to envisage a fairer method of allocating public funds to parties. We already have a situation in which there are numerous 'one-person' parties at national and provincial levels and it is alleged that many of these exist only so that their one or two representatives can enjoy a healthy income as an MP or MPL. If some minimum amount of public money were to be allocated to all registered parties, regardless of their electoral success, how many more one-person parties might we see emerging?

Apart from public funds, political parties can receive money from private donors, and this is a vital source of income for most of them. However, private donors appear more likely to give money to the bigger parties, as they assume that smaller parties have limited power to influence policy and decision-making. Once again, the bigger the party, the greater its access to funds.

4.2. Party Campaigns

Since 1994, both national and local elections have involved highly-contested party campaigns. This may have prompted a greater interest in opposition parties but, it has been observed that opposition parties often campaign around the same issues, with little in their campaigns that distinguishes their messages from one another. This has made it difficult for voters to make informed choices as to who has the best policies to address issues such as unemployment, housing, water, infrastructure, etc. In this regard,

opposition parties' campaigns have not been very successful in assisting voters to discern which party would best represent their interests.

Some analysts indicate that most opposition parties seldom offer alternative policies to voters, but rather emphasize their ability to run the government 'better' than the incumbent party. Additionally, opposition parties have been criticized for not capitalising on the discontent around issues such as service delivery. However, in 2011, service delivery was the key issue for parties. The DA chose: 'We deliver for all'; the IFP: 'It is all about you'; and the ACDP: 'Let's fix it'. Interestingly, regarding service delivery, the two major parties, the ANC and the DA, both received bad publicity regarding the 'open-toilets' issue in last year's municipal election; however, neither experienced a major loss at the polls. Indeed, the DA was able to increase its voter base by 52% overall.

4.3. Voting Loyalties

It has often been argued that South Africans continue to vote according to racial identity and historical loyalties. This has tended to entrench the dominance of the ANC, which continues to be perceived as the party representing the 'black' majority, as well as the party of liberation.[15] These perceptions seem likely to generate permanent majorities for the ANC for the foreseeable future. For example, Steven Friedman argues that identity loyalties to the ANC will ensure that the party will secure a majority regardless of its performance.[16] The same is probably true – if to a lesser extent – for the DA and for some of the smaller, regionally-based parties. As long as voters consider it a betrayal to change their voting choices, the smaller parties will have a difficult time winning over supporters of the major parties.

5. One-party Dominance

Much of the debate surrounding the 'dominant party' situation is centered around the theory that the alternation of power is crucial for democracy. However, not everyone holds the pessimistic view that a dominant party system is inimical to democracy. Some analysts have made the argument that a dominant party can offer political stability and predictability in economic policy. In their view, a dominant party, in our

case the ANC, is a much better 'stabilising mechanism' than could be expected with regular changes in government.

On the other hand, the overwhelming political power of the ANC, and the risks that this poses to the competitiveness of the multiparty system should not be ignored. Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins, writing in *The Awkward Embrace: One Party Domination and Democracy*, argue that party dominance is rather more likely to close down opposition parties and, in effect, transform democracy into an elective dictatorship.[17] One-party dominance, therefore, undermines the principle of electoral competition, a key component of democracy. Giliomee and Simkins further argue that the existence of strong opposition parties is necessary to check progression towards 'authoritarian tendencies' and the abuse of power by the incumbent government.

6. The Tripartite Alliance

It has been suggested that the ANC's alliance with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) acts as a check on the ANC's political power. Both Cosatu and the SACP have been centres of 'internal opposition' between elections,[18] serving almost as a 'non-electoral' opposition to the ANC. However, this is not sufficient for multiparty democracy. Cosatu is not a political party and, hence, cannot be perceived as an 'opposition' or 'alternative government'. The SACP, on the other hand, benefits from its alliance with the ruling party and its leading members occupy their parliamentary seats thanks to this alliance. Therefore, the SACP cannot play an effective oppositional role, and will not do so unless and until it withdraws from the alliance and starts campaigning for votes on its own.

A possible break-up between the alliance partners, some argue, is the most likely way that South Africa will move away from a dominant party system. Cosatu and SACP members would no longer feel obligated to vote for the ANC and a new party might even emerge from the split. However, although there have been tensions between the alliance partners, this break-up remains very unlikely, and the ANC's dominance is set to continue for some time.

7. Moving To a Two-Party System?

Looking back at the election results, it seems that South Africa may be moving towards a two-party system. The DA has worked hard to create a new image for itself. In last year's municipal election the party used Helen Zille, Patricia de Lille and Lindiwe Mazibuko as its public 'faces', the idea being to create an image of the DA as a political home for people of all races. The DA's election campaign was reasonably successful, and the party increased its vote among black voters, but are yet to make significant inroads into traditional ANC constituencies.

In previous elections the DA has claimed that small parties fragment the opposition vote, and has tried to convince voters not to 'waste' their votes on smaller opposition parties. The ultimate goal of the DA is to have a two-party system similar to the United States and the United Kingdom. However, one of the weaknesses of a two-party system is the restrictions it imposes in terms of electoral choice. For instance, minority or special-interest groups would no longer have representation in Parliament. The ACDP's Jo-Ann Downs argues: "Who will speak for the Afrikaner interests if not the Freedom Front Plus? Who will represent the cultural traditionalists if not the IFP? Who will present Indians if not the Minority Front?".[19] And the same can be said for Christians who support the ACDP.

But the DA (and for that matter, the ANC) can argue that such thinking depends on a very narrow idea of sectional interests. There is no reason in principle why Afrikaners cannot find a political home in either of the big parties; indeed, many do, and have risen to leadership positions. And the same can equally be said for Indians, traditionalists, Christians and any other 'minority' group one cares to mention.

Nevertheless, the DA's primary potential for growth lies in its ability to attract a significant number of black voters in forthcoming elections. Some analysts believe that the party has reached a ceiling with regard to white voters[20], as whites constitute only 9% of South Africa's population. And, for argument's sake, even if the DA absorbed all the 'white', 'coloured' and 'Indian' votes in the next national election in 2014, this would still not be enough to challenge the dominance of the governing party. Thus, the dominance of the ANC is likely to continue unless the DA can absorb other opposition parties (as it has done with the ID) *and* make substantial inroads into black communities.

8. Conclusion

The sustainability of South Africa's multiparty system is not only the responsibility of opposition parties, but also the responsibility of the voters. Should the DA consolidate its recent electoral gains, South Africa will be well on the way to a two-party system. But apart from the fact that this would obviously hurt the smaller parties, we may also ask whether a two-party system would best serve a society that is still characterised by considerations of race, ethnicity, class and religion. Perhaps we are still at a point on our democratic journey where the existence of a variety of smaller sectoral or special-interest parties gives voters the assurance that their voices are heard and their concerns accommodated.

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